LITERARY SALOON

RICK KOGAN

Truth and justice

An activist takes another look at unknown, unsettling 1940s murder

Chris Sweda/Tribune photo

Joe Allen is standing on the quiet Pilsen sidewalk in front of a saloon named Simone's, at 960 W. 18th St., and when we walk in all is lively, conversation and laughter filling the handsome space along with so, so many people for a pre-cocktail hour Friday.

"I am here at least once a week, more often when the weather's nice," says Allen, who lives a couple of blocks away, as we settle into a relatively quiet back room and, having drinks (he a beer, me a vodka), start talking about his remarkable book, "People Wasn't Made to Burn" (Haymarket Books) and the even more extraordinary story it tells.

The book's subtitle is "A True Story of Race, Murder, and Justice in Chicago," and though those first two elements — race and murder — have been a part of the landscape here almost forever in sad and ample supply, the latter — justice — has not always been so easy to find.

Allen's book is focused firmly on two people: James Hickman, a black Mississippi sharecropper who had come to Chicago for a better life for himself and his family, and his landlord David Coleman, a black man from Mississippi with ambitions to be a businessman. It is focused on two days in 1947: Jan. 16, when a fire swept through the attic room at 1733 W. Washburne St. that Hickman shared with his wife, Annie, and their seven children, causing the deaths of the four youngest, and July 16, when Hickman walked up to Coleman and, convinced Coleman had set the fatal fire, shot him four times, causing his death three days later.

Allen is understandably and justifiably sympathetic to Hickman but he tells the story in admirably straightforward fashion.

The background of the men and events paints a horrific portrait of the inhumane conditions in which blacks were forced to live in the post-WWII Chicago. The aftermath of the fire and shooting, and subsequent murder trial, attracted a great deal of attention and some big names, including writer Willard Motley and actress Tallulah Bankhead. But the citizens who formed the Hickman Defense Committee are the real heroes, and the diverse group included the great lawyer Leon Despres, who would later become alderman of the 5th Ward and often the lone independent voice in Mayor Richard J. Daley's City Council.

The book was born on a back porch in 2008. Allen was attending a birthday party for a friend and was talking with Frank Fried, most notable perhaps as the concert promoter who brought The Beatles to Comiskey Park in 1965 but also an activist intimately involved many causes. Fried told Allen the Hickman story, and Allen was hooked.

Forming the rock-solid foundation of his research was a Harper's magazine story, "The Hickman Story," published in 1948 and written by the extraordinary journalist John Bartlow Martin (about whom you will read more here in a couple of weeks).

"Martin's piece was an amazingly detailed job of reporting and beautiful writing," says Allen, adding that he is proud to have his book illustrated with some of the same Ben Shahn (another all-but-forgotten giant) drawings that accompanied Martin's original article.

It is something of a small miracle that Allen ever be-

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>
> — *Joe Allen*

came a writer. The only son (he has three younger sisters) of working-class parents, he grew up in Stoughton, Mass. "Writing was a source of frustration and even humiliation," he says, recalling one of his high school teachers reading to the class an essay he had written as an "example of bad writing."

But he read and he read, "more than most, books about social history." In college at University of Massachusetts Boston he majored in history but, he says, "basically used college as a way to explore life. I met a lot of people and ideas that expanded my mind." He lived in New York for a time and later San Francisco and San Diego, working mostly in the freight/moving business.

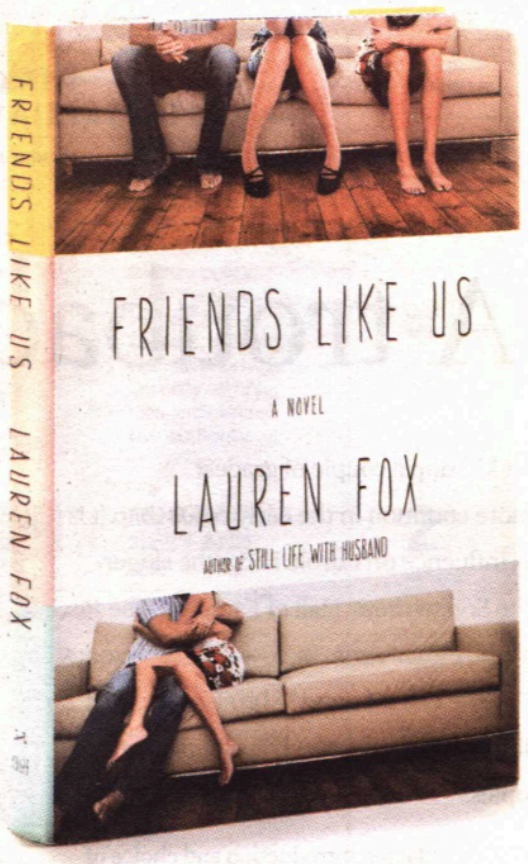
He came to Chicago in 1993 and worked for nearly a decade for UPS. He starting writing seriously and had many pieces published in the Internationalist Socialist Review, which is published here. He wrote the 2008 book "Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost," also published by Haymarket. He currently works for Smooth Moves Inc., which specializes in working with scientific and medical facilities.

"I like to think of myself as an activist first, historian second," he says, talking about his days as a Teamster, of helping unionize some fellow kitchen workers and his ongoing relationship with members of many local unions, some of which hold gatherings at Simone's.

Most of the principals in the Hickman story were no longer alive when Allen started to work on his book. The trial transcript had been, Allen says sadly, "lost to history." But he was able to talk with one of the Hickman's children, Willis, who still lives in Chicago, and his eyes still sparkle at the memory of sitting with the 100-year-old Despres before his death and discussing the trial.

"Working on this book allowed me to explore Chicago in a more intimate way that ever before," he says. "The Hickman story is largely unknown. There are a lot of people who tell stories that massage the past in ways that makes it not threatening. The rest of us just prefer the truth."

rkogan@tribune.com



Friends Like Us
By Lauren Fox, Knopf, 269 pages, $24.95

The intimacy of friendship

BY **RACHEL BERTSCHE**

Lauren Fox knows friendship. Her second novel, "Friends Like Us," shines brightest in the scenes where her narrator, Willa, and Willa's BFF-roommate, Jane, find themselves smack in the middle of A Moment — one of those small and seemingly insignificant exchanges that true intimacy is made of.

Take this memory, one of Willa's favorites: "Just as we were regaining control, finally, just as our torrent of giggles was finally subsiding, Ben called out from the other room, 'What's so funny?' and set us off again, sent us to that place you go with your best friend, to the rollicking inauguration of an inside joke that will remain hysterically funny, only to the two of you and to the annoyance of many others, for years." During these scenes, which are too rare, one feels less like an observer of Willa and Jane's relationship and more like a little sister, the kind who quietly hangs around on the off chance she'll eventually be let in on the fun.

But it's Ben who ultimately throws things off kilter. He was Willa's best friend in high school, and after a seven-year hiatus, the two reconnect at a reunion. When there's immediate chemistry between Ben and Jane, and Willa encourages them to date, most anyone can predict this doesn't end well.

I would have flagged this with "Spoiler Alert!" but we learn in the introduction that Willa and Jane haven't spoken in five years. The book chronicles the unraveling of the relationship, and the looming question throughout is how it will finally meet its demise.

It's hard to know who to root for in "Friends Like Us," and maybe that's the point. Willa is likable enough, but within the first 20 pages we learn that she has gone through devastating breakups with both Ben and Jane, her two closest friends. A reader can't not wonder: What's wrong with this girl that she keeps driving her best friends away?

But this isn't just a novel about friendship. Fox is writing about intimacy in its many forms. Willa's relationship with her brother, and their combined issues with their parents — who lingered in a miserable marriage before divorcing — take center stage for much of the novel. "Until they finally ended it, their marriage was another planet, a harsh extraterrestrial climate — scalding mornings followed by blue-black evenings so frigid no life could possibly be sustained there."

Willa's childhood and palpable familial resentments are made OK because, in her post-grad, underemployed, still-figuring-it-all-out world, her friends are her family. And in giving each pal a serious love of language — Jane is a struggling poet, Ben a part-time librarian and Willa a wannabe graphic-novelist and sometimes advertising copywriter — Fox has created quite the witty clan. There's no shortage of wordplay (" 'Can you teach me how to talk dirty?' she wrote. 'Mud!' I wrote back. 'Motor oil!' ") and puns. Wordplay is Willa's defense mechanism of choice, and at the exact moments when you want to scream at her to knock it off already, one of her friends does it for you.

Fox is an incisive writer whose passion for stringing together clever and poignant sentences comes through on the page. And even if "Friends Like Us" has a bit of a rom-com premise, Fox's insights into the trials of the emerging adults and her realistic — if not necessarily uplifting — conclusion elevate the novel into thought-provoking territory.

Rachel Bertsche is the author of "MWF Seeking BFF." Bertsche and Fox will appear at the 2012 Printers Row Lit Fest.